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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on data concerning the characteristics, attitudes, and school experiences of rural dropouts. The discussion, which draws largely upon the High School and Beyond database, considers two primary concerns. The first deals with differences between rural dropouts and their rural counterparts who stayed in school. Areas of inquiry include: gender, grades, test scores, self-concept, locus of control, life values, and students' ratings of school conditions. The second consideration encompasses the differences between rural and urban dropouts relative to the same criteria. In general, results of the study were consistent with other analyses revealing differences in attitudes between dropouts and graduates. Although no gender-related differences were found, differences in socioeconomic status were pronounced. Rural dropouts rated their schools lower on all items than rural stayers, although both groups gave low ratings to effectiveness and fairness of discipline. The figures indicate that dropouts' lower self-esteem may be partially a result of negative school experiences rather than personality traits. Rural dropouts were more likely than urban dropouts to report homemaking or looking for work as activities after dropping out. Rural dropouts were also more likely to report getting a job or not getting along with teachers as the cause for dropping out. More than urban students, rural dropouts were more likely to be American Indian or white and more often reported leaving school to get married. Urban dropouts, who were more likely to be black or Hispanic, more often reported leaving school to support families or because friends were dropping out. This document recommends further research. This paper contains 14 tables. (TES)

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Rural Public School Dropouts: Data from High School and Beyond

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In recent years, a vast amount of financial and human resources has gone into achieving quality in public schools, and educators have placed a renewed emphasis on achievement and performance standards. These developments are considered by most as necessary and important changes for the strengthening of our educational system. They have, however, led some educators (Hamilton, 1986; Levin, 1985; and Natriello, 1986) to express their concern over how these developments will affect the "casualties" of our public schools--the students who are already discouraged, those who already are having academic and emotional problems in school. While some aspects of the new agenda for effective schools may actually help these students, the emphasis on more rigorous curricular offerings and performance standards may lead to further frustration, discouragement and alienation. Too often, this negative cycle leads to predictable result; the student chooses to drop out of school.

Along with an increasing concern relative to adolescents who choose to drop out of school, recent research has focused on the characteristics of students who drop out and the reasons why they choose to do so (e.g., Ekstrom et al., 1986). In fact, Morrow (1986) estimates that hundreds of articles have addressed these issues. Nevertheless, a substantial gap in dropout literature exists

relative to rural dropouts and the unique circumstances of rural schools' environment. Do rural students who are early school-leavers differ in their personal characteristics and attitudes from school-leavers in urban areas? Do they drop out for the same reasons? Are they more likely to leave in order to find the type of employment (e.g., wood-cutting, farm work) that is only available in rural areas? The answers to these questions are not merely academic if we seriously intend to offer programs that will keep the "marginal" rural student in school.

One of the difficulties with dropout research is developing a reliable base of information relative to dropouts. The High School and Beyond (HS&B) data base provides an unique opportunity to explore the student characteristics, attitudes, and school-related factors that influence a student's decision to leave school before obtaining a high school diploma. The care with which the stratified sample of almost thirty thousand high school sophomores was chosen, and the wealth of information that was obtained, make the HS&B data base an important source of information on public school dropouts.

The High School and Beyond data set provides a starting point for serious research on rural dropouts. The focus of this presentation will, therefore, be on what the HS&B data set reveals about the characteristics, attitudes, and school

experiences of rural dropouts. More specifically, the discussion will be focused on two general areas of concern:

1. The differences between rural dropouts and their rural counterparts who stayed in school relative to gender, grades, test scores, self-concept, locus of control, ratings of the importance of life values, and ratings of school conditions.
2. The differences between rural dropouts and their urban and suburban counterparts who dropped out of school relative to life activities, reasons for dropping out, ratings of the importance of life values, and ratings of school conditions.

In general, results of this study were generally consitent with other analyses (e.g., Rumberger, 1983) that revealed a number of differences in attitudes and experiences between dropouts and high school graduates. For example, rural dropouts had lower grades than rural stayers and also lower scores on the HS&B achievement test composite. Although no statistically significant gender differences were found, the differences between dropouts and stayers relative to socio-economic status (SES) were pronounced. Over 50% of the rural dropouts were from the bottom quartile on the HS&B SES composite variable as opposed to 28.6% of rural stayers.

Statistical analysis revealed that rural dropouts and stayers differed in their appraisal of the importance of

life values. Although rural dropouts rated success and security at work as less important than did rural stayers, they gave higher ratings to having lots of money. They also gave higher ratings to issues related to having children as well as correcting inequalities. These responses contradict some portrayals of dropouts as being present-oriented and less concerned about both the future and other people (Cervantes, 1965). In their ratings of school conditions, rural dropouts rated their schools lower on all items. Nevertheless, both groups gave low marks to effectiveness and fairness of discipline. Regardless of our "objective" appraisal of the accuracy of this assessment, their perceptions of schools' discipline procedures should be a matter of concern to all educators.

Differences between rural dropouts and stayers from just the New England/Mid-Atlantic regions were analyzed. Results were generally consistent with those found between the overall dropout and stayer population. But, New England/Mid-Atlantic dropouts were somewhat more likely to give importance to moving from the area. In their ratings of school conditions, rural dropouts from this region were even more likely than rural dropouts from other regions to give lower marks to schools in terms of the effectiveness and fairness of their discipline procedures. They also gave lower ratings to teachers' interest in students.

Many authors (Bachman, 1972; Cervantes, 1965; Rumberger, 1983) have cited low self-esteem as a characteristic of students who drop out. The results of this study indicated that rural dropouts did have lower self-esteem in both 1980 and 1982. Statistical analysis indicated the difference was statistically significant in 1980 but not in 1982 after the students had dropped out of school. This is consistent with some findings (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) which indicated that self-esteem of dropouts may rise after they leave school, thus indicating that dropouts "lower self-esteem" may be partially a result of negative school experiences rather than a personality trait. Rural dropouts and stayers were also compared on the HS&B locus of control scale. Analysis revealed that dropouts' scores showed a greater sense of internal control that stayers but not to a statistically significant degree. Nevertheless, these ressults further contradict the stereotypic portrayal of the dropout as seeing himself or herself as a victim of fate. Interestingly, locus of control scores increased to a statistically significant degree for 1980 to 1982 for both stayers and dropouts. Further research is needed to determine whether this is a result of maturation or of some school-related factor.

The results of this study also indicated that rural dropouts may differ from dropouts in urban and suburban areas in their reasons for dropping out, their activities

when they do drop out, their reasons for dropping out, and their life values. In terms of activities, dropouts from rural schools were more likely than dropouts from urban or suburban schools to report homemaking or looking for work as activities. In terms of reasons cited for dropping out, rural-school dropouts werre most likely, to a statistically significant degree, to report leaving school to get married, and dropouts from rural or farming communicties were more likely to report that they couldn't get along with teachers.

A more intensive investigation of the differences between rural and urban dropouts was performed. In a comparison of these two groups relative to race, gender, and geographic reion, a number of differences emerged. Urban dropouts were more likely to be black or Hispanic; rural dropouts were more likely to be American Indian or white. Percentages of male and female dropouts were comparable, although there were slightly more female rural dropouts (47.7% as opposed to 46.4% from urban schools). Rural dropouts were found in higher percentages in the South and the Western and Mountain regions.

Urban dropouts were more likely to report that they dropped out because they had to support their family or because their friends were dropping out. Rural dropouts were more likely, to a statistically significant degree, to report getting married as a reason, and slightly more likely to report pregnancy, being offered a job, and not getting

along with teachers as reasons. When just white rural and urban dropouts were compared, differences between groups remained relatively constant. Rural dropouts were still more likely to report getting married, and they were slightly more likely to report pregnancy and wanting to travel as reasons for dropping out.

The life values of white dropouts from rural New England/ Mid-Atlantic schools were compared with those of white dropouts from the South Atlantic and East South Central regions relative to their appraisal of the importance of various life values. New England/Mid-Atlantic dropouts were more likely than those from the other region to value moving from the area, having liesure time, and correcting inequalities as important. In their ratings of school conditions, dropouts from the New England/Mid-Atlantic region were more critical of all conditions, particularly of fairness and effectiveness of discipline practices.

Based on these latter findings, a portrait emerges of the white, rural, New England/Mid-Atlantic dropout as having a strong sense of justice (thus rating correcting inequalities as an important life value) but feeling alienated from the school's system of discipline. Interestingly, these results are consistent with some portrayals of Hispanic and Black urban dropouts (Fine, 1986; Fine & Rosenberg, 1983). They also raise the issue of

whether cultural and value conflicts underly the dropping out behavior of white, rural adolescents.

Even though caution must be exercied in generalizing from the HS&B rural dropouts to the rural dropout population in general, the results of this study suggest a number of considerations for evaluating the rural dropout problem and for future research. First, some findings reinforce the typical portrayal of dropouts in the literature as having low grades, low test scores, and as being from homes of low socio-economic status. The findings do, however, contradict portrayals of the dropout as having less self-esteem (at least, as a personality trait), less internal sense of control, and less concern with the future and with relationships with others.

Second, reasons cited for dropping out were relatively constant among the "subgroups" of dropouts examined in this study. Dropouts from all subgroups reported having poor grades and "school wasn't for me" as the primary reasons for dropping out. Students from rural schools, and students from rural or farming communities, cited marriage and pregnancy as reasons more frequently than their urban and suburban counterparts. Since support and social services for pregnant teenagers and young married couples may be less accessible in rural communities, these issues need to be considered and addressed in the rural regions of states such as Maine.

Although not always at a level of statistical significance, rural dropouts were also more likely to cite being offered a job and not getting along with teachers as reasons for dropping out. Indeed, part-time jobs such as farm work are often available to many rural youth. When combined with other factors--such as low grades and frustration with school--the lure of work is undoubtedly tempting. But, the economic consequences of dropping out have been documented (Levin, 1985), and educators need to counterbalance the temptation of work if they wish to keep youth in school. Perhaps a more realistic balance of work and study--with more options available for obtaining necessary skills while working (e.g., a six-year program instead of the traditional four) would keep more rural youth in school and give them better prospects for the future. It also appears that attempts at "mentoring", or fostering more positive relationships with teachers or other adults might result in more youth completing their education.

All of these considerations need to be addressed through further research and with samples other than that of High School and Beyond. Particular attention should be given to studying those school experiences that tend to diminish rural youth's self-esteem possibly influencing them to seek attempts to find more reinforcing experiences through work, marriage, or starting a family. Also, since marriage and pregnancy consistently appeared as issues

relative to rural dropouts, special and considerable attention needs to be directed at research relative to the unique problems of the rural female dropout. Results of this study indicate that factors in rural schools and communities may be exacerbating the female dropout problem.

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Table 1

A Comparison of Dropouts and Stayers on Life Values (Number and percent rating life value as very important.)

Measure	Stayers Total N=7099		Dropouts Total N=750	
	N	%	N	%
Life Values				
Happy family life	5473	84.1	535	79.1*
Success in work	5505	84.7	503	74.5*
Lots of money	2027	31.2	266	39.9*
Strong friendships	5361	82.5	516	76.6*
Steady work	5473	84.8	533	79.9*
Being leader in community	718	11.2	62	9.3*
Child having better opportunities	4674	72.2	514	76.9*
Living close to parents	1329	20.6	122	18.3 *
Moving from area	917	14.2	137	20.5*
Correcting inequalities	828	12.9	96	14.5*
Having children	2550	39.4	274	40.8*
Liesure time	4883	69.0	424	63.3*

* = significant difference between groups, p .05.

Table 2

A Comparison of Dropouts and Stayers on Their Ratings of School Conditions (Number and percent rating school condition as poor.)

Measure	Stayers Total N=7099		Dropouts Total N=750	
	N	%	N	%
School Condition				
Condition of building	578	8.9	86	13.0*
Library facilities	437	6.8	69	10.7*
Academic instruction	420	7.3	75	14.2*
School's reputation in community	516	8.6	83	14.5 *
Teacher's interest in students	718	11.5	156	24.9*
Effectiveness of discipline	725	11.8	99	16.7*
Fairness of discipline	1264	20.5	189	31.2*
School spirit	639	9.9	81	12.5*

* = significant difference between groups, p .05.

Table 3

A Comparison of Dropouts and Stayers from New England/Mid-Atlantic Rural Schools on Life Values (Number and percent rating life value as very important.)

Measure	Stayers Total N=908		Dropouts Total N=58	
	N	%	N	%
Life Values				
Happy family life	750	82.7	39	67.2*
Success in work	789	87.1	43	75.4*
Lots of money	322	35.6	22	38.6
Strong friendships	771	85.4	45	77.6*
Steady work	793	87.7	46	79.3*
Being leader in community	68	7.6	2	3.5
Child having better opportunities	617	68.4	41	73.2*
Living close to patents	173	19.3	8	10.6
Moving from area	139	15.4	19	33.3*
Correcting inequalities	103	11.5	8	14.0
Having children	331	36.7	23	39.7*
Liesure time	667	73.5	37	66.1*

* = significant difference between groups, p .05.

Table 4

A Comparison of Dropouts and Stayers from New England/Mid-Atlantic Rural Schools on Their Ratings of School Conditions (Number and percent rating school condition as poor.)

Measure	Stayers Total N=908		Dropouts Total N=58	
	N	%	N	%
School Condition				
Condition of building	47	5.2	7	12.1*
Library facilities	62	6.9	7	13.0
Academic instruction	45	5.4	9	16.4*
School's reputation in community	92	10.7	15	29.4*
Teacher's interest in students	101	11.4	18	32.1*
Effectiveness of discipline	112	12.7	17	31.5
Fairness of discipline	178	20.2	23	42.6*
School spirit	118	13.1	8	15.1

* = significant difference between groups, p .05.

Table 5

A Comparison of Self-Concept and Locus of Control for Dropouts and Stayers

Measure	Stayers				Dropouts			
	1980 N=6676		1982 N=7099		1980 N=721		1982 N=750	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Self-Concept	.26	1.5	.76*	2.5	.69	2.1	1.1*	2.9
Locus of Control	.23	1.5	.72*	2.4	.26	2.2	.83*	3.0

* = significant difference within groups, 1980-82, p .05.

Note: lower scores on self-concept variable indicate more positive self-esteem. Higher scores on locus of control scale indicate a greater sense of internal control.

Table 6

Relation Between Dropouts Activities and Place of Residence

Activity	School Urbanicity	Area of Residency
Working	0	0
Taking college courses	0	0
Taking voc. or tech. courses	0	0
Apprenticeship	1	0
Armed services	0	1
Homemaker	1	0
With job, but not working	0	0
Looking for work	1	0
Taking a break from school	0	0
Other	1	0

0 = Not statistically significant.

1 = Statistically significant at the .05 level.

Table 7

Relation Between Reasons for Dropping Out and Place of Residence

Reasons	School Urbanicity	Area of Residency
Expelled	0	0
Married	1	1
Pregnant	0	0
Poor grades	0	0
Support family	1	0
Offered job	0	0
Armed services	0	0
Moved from area	0	0
School wasn't for me	0	0
School too dangerous	0	0
Wanted to travel	0	0
Friends were dropping out	1	0
Didn't get into program	0	0
Disability or illness	0	0
Couldn't get along with teachers	0	1
Couldn't get along with students	0	0

0 = Not statistically significant.

1 = Statistically significant.

Table 8

A Comparison of Dropouts from Urban and Rural Schools

Relative to Race, Sex, and Geographic Region

Category	Urban Total N=799		Rural Total N=750	
	N	%	N	%
Race				
Hispanic	254	31.8	162	21.6
Am. Indian	13	1.6	29	3.9
Asian	6	.8	5	.7
Black	240	30.0	64	8.5
White	254	31.8	483	64.4
Other	32	4.0	7	.9
Sex				
Male	428	53.6	392	52.3
Female	371	46.4	358	47.7
Geographic Region				
New England	28	3.5	32	4.3
Mid-Atlantic	181	22.7	48	6.4
So. Atlantic	125	15.6	144	19.2
E. So. Central	28	3.5	96	12.8
W. So. Central	124	15.5	124	16.5
E. No. Central	161	20.2	90	12.0
W. No. Central	47	5.9	79	10.5
Mountain	28	3.5	70	9.3
Pacific	77	9.6	67	8.9

Table 9

Dropouts from Rural or Farming Community: Reasons for Dropping Out (N = 380)

Reason	% "Yes"
Had poor grades	30.4
School wasn't for me	29.5
Married or planned to	28.5
Offered job	19.8
Couldn't get along with teachers	19.8
Pregnant	10.8

Table 10

A Comparison of Dropouts from Urban and Rural Schools Relative to Reasons for Dropping Out (Percent answering "yes" to suggested reason.)

Reason	Urban Total N=681	Rural Total N=691
	% Yes	% Yes
Had poor grades	32.6	28.3
School wasn't for me	25.9	28.6
Offered job	18.3	20.0
Had to support family	14.8	8.9
Couldn't get along with teachers	14.0	16.1
Married or planned to	12.1	25.7
Pregnant	10.8	12.1

Table 11

Comparison of Dropouts from Rural and Urban Schools Relative to Reason for Dropping Out (Percent responding "yes" to suggested reason.)

Reasons	Urban N = 681	Rural N = 691
Expelled	11.0	8.1
Married	12.1	25.7*
Pregnant	10.8	12.5
Poor grades	32.6	28.3
Support family	14.8	8.9*
Offered job	18.3	20.0
Armed services	5.9	4.7
Moved from area	3.8	2.7
School wasn't for me	25.9	28.6
School too dangerous	2.5	1.2
Wanted to travel	4.1	5.6
Friends were dropping out	4.0	1.5*
Didn't get into program	7.3	4.7
Disability or illness	4.5	4.4
Couldn't get along with teachers	14.0	16.1
Couldn't get along with students	5.2	6.8

* = significant difference between groups, p .05

Table 12

Comparison of White Rural and Urban Dropouts Relative to Reason for Dropping Out (Percent responding "Yes")

Reasons	Urban N = 254	Rural N = 483
Expelled	12.7	8.1
Married	16.1	28.6*
Pregnant	6.8	12.2
Poor grades	38.5	27.0*
Support family	8.8	6.5
Offered job	21.5	21.2
Armed services	5.9	5.1
Moved from area	2.9	3.5
School wasn't for me	40.0	33.6
School too dangerous	1.5	1.2
Wanted to travel	2.9	5.8
Friends were dropping out	6.3	1.6*
Didn't get into program	6.3	3.9
Disability or illness	2.0	4.1
Couldn't get along with teachers	18.5	16.1
Couldn't get along with students	6.8	7.4

* = significant difference between groups, p .05

Table 13

A Comparison of White Rural Dropouts by School Region on Their Ratings of Life Values (Number and percent rating life value as very important.)

Measure	New England & Mid-Atlantic Total N=65		So. Atlantic & E. So. Central Total N=149	
	N	%	N	%
Life Values				
Happy family life	43	75.4	108	76.6
Success in work	39	67.2	116	81.7
Lots of money	22	38.6	52	37.4
Strong friendships	45	77.6	109	77.3
Steady work	46	79.3	118	83.7
Being leader in community	2	3.5	9	6.3
Child having better opportunities	41	73.2	104	74.3*
Living close to parents	8	14.3	24	17.0
Moving from area	19	33.3	20	14.4*
Correcting inequalities	8	14.0	15	10.8
Having children	23	39.7	63	45.3
Liesure time	37	66.1	88	62.9

* = significant difference between groups, p .05.

Table 14

A Comparison of White Rural Dropouts by School Region on Their Ratings of School Conditions (Number and percent rating school condition as poor.)

Measure	New England & Mid-Atlantic Total N=65		So. Atlantic & E. So. Central Total N=149	
	N	%	N	%
School Condition				
Condition of building	7	12.1	14	10.1
Library facilities	7	13.0	16	11.9
Academic instruction	9	16.4	15	14.2
School's reputation in community	15	29.4	16	13.4
Teacher's interest in students	18	32.1	35	26.3
Effectiveness of discipline	17	31.5	17	13.4*
Fairness of discipline	23	42.6	37	28.9*
School spirit	8	15.1	18	13.2

* - significant difference between groups, p .05.